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# Persia and the Golden Rule

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## Persia and the Golden Rule

Harry J. Gensler<sup>1</sup>

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My paper has two parts. First, I talk about the golden rule. After introducing the rule and its global importance, I explain why many scholars dismiss it as a vague proverb that leads to absurdities when we try to formulate it clearly. I defend the golden rule against such objections. Second, I talk about the golden rule in Persia and Islam; I consider Persian sources (Muslim and non-Muslim) and also non-Persian Muslim sources. I show that the golden rule is deeply rooted in Persia and Islam. And I point out special ways that this tradition's understanding of the golden rule can contribute to those outside this tradition.

**Keywords:** Golden rule, Persia, Islam,

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I felt very honored when I was asked to write a paper for this journal, which is housed at the distinguished University of Religions and Denominations in Iran. I decided to write on something centrally important to me (the golden rule – “Treat others as you want to be treated”) but relate it to the people of Iran (and thus to Persia and Islam).

While I am an expert on the golden rule, I am a beginner on Persia and Islam. I am separated by religion, culture, and language (as a Christian American who struggles even with Persian names). But the golden rule itself, with its emphasis on switching places, is a great help to build bridges across differences, as we increasingly need to do in today's world. I ask forgiveness for errors in how I connect the golden rule with Islam and Persia, and I invite others to carry this discussion further.<sup>2</sup>

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1. Professor, Loyola University, USA.

2. Many ideas in this paper are adapted from my new book, *Ethics and the Golden Rule* (New York: Routledge Press, 2013). Several of my earlier books also discuss the golden rule: (1) my textbook, *Ethics: A Contemporary Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 1998 and

## 1. Understanding the golden rule

The golden rule says, “Treat others as you want to be treated.” The golden rule is a global standard, endorsed by nearly every religion and culture, important for families and professionals across the planet, and a key part of a growing global-ethics movement. However, many academics see the golden rule as vague and riddled with difficulties.

Here is a story.<sup>3</sup> There once was a grandpa who lived with his family. As Grandpa grew older, he began to slobber and spill his food, so the family had him eat alone. When he dropped his bowl and broke it, they scolded him and got him a cheap wooden bowl. Grandpa was so unhappy. Now, one day the young grandson was working with wood. “What are you doing?” Mom and Dad asked. “I am making a wooden bowl,” he said, “for when you two get old and must eat alone.” Mom and Dad then looked sad and realized how they were mistreating Grandpa. So, they decided to keep quiet when he spills his food and to let him eat with the family.

The heart of the golden rule is *switching places*. You step into another’s shoes. What you do to Grandpa, you imagine being done to you. You ask, “Am I willing that if I were in the same situation, then I be treated that same way?”

The golden rule seems simple. But the usual wording is loose and invites objections. Thus, many academics dismiss the golden rule as a folk proverb that self-destructs when analyzed carefully. But I claim that we just need to understand the golden rule more clearly. And so my job, as a philosopher, is to try to clean up the wording.

I put my attempt at a clearer wording on a shirt.<sup>4</sup> The top says, “the

2011), translated into Persian by Mehdi Akhavan (Tehran, Iran: Elmi-Farhangi, 2009); (2) a technical ethical treatise, *Formal Ethics* (New York: Routledge, 1996), translated into Persian by Mehdi Akhavan (Tehran, Iran: Elmi-Farhangi, 2009); and (3) a logic textbook, *Introduction to Logic* (New York: Routledge, 2002 and 2010), whose golden-rule chapter was translated into Persian by Mehdi Akhavan and published in the Iranian journal *Naqd wa nazār*.

3. My story is from “The old man and his grandson,” which was published in 1812 by the Grimm Brothers in Germany (<http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/2591>). Variations exist across the globe, including a Buddhist version from ancient India (<http://www.sacred-texts.com/bud/j4/j4010.htm>).

4. You can get your very own golden-rule shirt, in many styles and colors, from my golden-rule Web page (<http://www.harryhiker.com/gr>). This popular page also has further information, videos, stories, links, and so on relating to the golden rule—and you can display it in Persian and other languages. (If anyone wants me to sell a Persian version of one of my golden-rule shirts, tell me which shirt and give me the translation of the text into Persian.)

golden rule,” and has symbols for eight major world religions. The bottom has my formula:<sup>5</sup>

Gold 1. Treat others only as you consent to being treated in the same situation.

My formula is intended to help us apply the golden rule to difficult cases.

The golden rule, as I understand it, commands consistency. It demands a fit between my act toward another and my desire about how I would be treated in the same situation. The golden rule does not replace other moral norms or give all the answers. It does not say specifically what to do (and so does not command bad actions if we have flawed desires). Instead, it forbids an inconsistent combination. It tells us not to combine these two things:

- I do something to another.
- I am unwilling that this be done to me in the same situation.

The golden rule, far from being vague, is a precise consistency test. Suppose I force Grandpa to eat alone. I switch places in my mind: I imagine that *I* am forced to eat alone in the same situation. Do I condemn this same act done to me? Then, I condemn how I treat Grandpa. *I condemn how I treat another, if I condemn the same act when I imagine it done to me in the same situation.*

Switching places is a golden idea that is global and beautifully simple. It promotes justice, consideration, cooperation, and unity.

\* \* \*

People who reject the golden rule usually understand it in a crude way, often as *the literal golden rule*:

If you want X to do something to you, then do this same thing to X.

The literal golden rule has no same-situation clause and it tells what specific act to do (instead of forbidding an inconsistent action–desire combination).

The literal golden rule often works well. Suppose you want Leila to be kind to you; then you are to be kind to her. Or suppose you want Amir not to hurt you (or rob you, or be inconsiderate to you); then you are not to do these things to him. These applications seem sensible.

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5. I call this “Gold 1” because many variations are equally correct (so my book has a “Gold 2,” “Gold 3,” and so on).

But the literal golden rule can lead to absurdities in two ways. First, you may be in a *different situation* from X:

- To one whose father is hard of hearing: If you want your father not to speak more loudly to you (since your hearing is normal), then do not speak more loudly to him.
- To a patient: If you want the doctor to remove your appendix, then remove the doctor's appendix.
- To a parent: If you want your child not to punish you, then do not punish him.

Gold 1's same-situation clause deals with this problem. Consider our first example. I speak loudly to my father (who is hard of hearing); but I do not want him to speak loudly to me (since my hearing is normal). While this is sensible, it violates the literal golden rule—which says that if I want my father to speak normally (not loudly) to me, then this is how I am to speak to him. This ignores differences in situation. The literal golden rule says: "If you want others to treat you in a given way in your present situation, then this is how you are to treat them—even if their situation is very different."

With Gold 1, I ask how I desire that I would be treated if I were *in the same situation* as my father (and thus hard of hearing). I desire that if I were in his same situation then people would speak loudly to me. So, I speak loudly to him.

We can take "same situation" here as "exactly similar situation" or "relevantly similar situation." In the first case, I imagine myself in my father's exact place (with all his properties). In the second, I imagine myself having those properties of my father (such as being hard of hearing) that I think are or might be relevant to deciding how loudly one should speak to him. Either approach works fine.

The same-situation clause is also important for the appendix example. Here the literal golden rule told the patient to remove the doctor's appendix. The same-situation clause blocks this, since the patient clearly does not desire that if he were in the place of his doctor (with a healthy appendix), then his appendix be removed by a sick patient ignorant of medicine. In applying the golden rule, we need to ask this question:

Am I now willing that if I were in the same situation, then this be done to me?

The other person's situation includes likes and dislikes. So, if you are a waiter who hates broccoli, but your customer likes and orders it,

then you imagine being served broccoli in an imagined situation where you like and order it.

The same-situation clause is also important for the punishment case. Suppose that I have a two-year-old son, little Darius, who puts his fingers into electrical outlets. I try to discourage him from doing this, but nothing works. Finally, I decide that I need to punish him when he does it. I want to see if I can punish him without violating the golden rule. Again, I should ask this question:

Am I now willing that if I were in the same situation as Darius, then I be punished?

I would answer yes (since punishment would likely have saved my life). I might add, “I am thankful that my parents punished me in such cases, even though I was not pleased then.” So here I can punish my child without breaking the golden rule, since I am willing that I would have been treated the same way in the same situation.

Now, in English (I do not know about Persian), people often ask the golden-rule question wrongly, in a way that would force them to do whatever the other person wants. They ask, “If I were in the other person’s place, how would I then want to be treated?” Now, if you were in little Darius’s place (not knowing the dangers of electricity and not wanting to be punished for putting fingers into outlets), then you would not want to be punished. So, if we misapply the golden rule, we would conclude that we should not punish Darius for putting his fingers into outlets. But it is better to apply the golden rule as explained above. I can punish little Darius (to save his life), since I am now willing that I would have been punished in this situation (to save my life).

Sometimes we need to act against what others want. We may need to stop a baby who wants to put fingers into outlets, refuse a salesperson who wants to sell us overpriced products, fail a student who does not work, defend ourselves against an attacker, or jail a dangerous criminal. And yes, we are now willing that if we were in their situation, then we be treated that way. The golden rule lets us act against what others want, as long as we are now willing that if we were in their situation, then we be treated similarly.

Immanuel Kant’s objection to the golden rule rests on this same confusion.<sup>6</sup> Here you are a judge, about to sentence a dangerous

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6. Kant’s objection is in his *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. Herbert J. Paton (New York: Harper & Row, 1964, originally published in 1785), 97 footnote.

criminal to jail. The criminal protests and appeals (incorrectly) to the golden rule: “If you were in my place, you would want not to be sent to jail; so, by the golden rule you cannot send me to jail.” You should respond: “I can send you to jail, because I am now willing that if I were in your place (as a dangerous criminal), then I be sent to jail.” You could add, “If I do such things, then please send me to jail too!”

\* \* \*

Recall that the literal golden rule can lead to absurdities in two ways. We dealt with the *different-circumstances* problem by adding a same-situation clause. A second problem is that the golden rule can tell us to do bad things if we have *defective desires* about how we are to be treated:

- To Electra (who thinks electrical shocks are pleasant and wants others to give her such shocks): If you want others to give you electrical shocks, then give electrical shocks to others.
- To one who desires to be hated: If you want others to hate you, then hate them.

Gold 1’s consistency form deals with this second problem. Recall that Gold 1 does not tell us exactly what to do but instead forbids an inconsistent action–desire combination.

Consider Electra, who wanted to follow the golden rule but got her facts wrong. She thought severe electrical shocks were pleasant. So, she shocked others and, yes, she was willing that she be shocked in their place. She followed the golden rule but acted wrongly. While Electra satisfied golden-rule consistency, she can be faulted for not getting her facts straight. Applying the golden rule wisely requires more than just sitting down in ignorance and asking how we want to be treated. To lead reliably to right action, the golden rule needs *knowledge* (especially about how our action affects others) and *imagination* (imagining what it would be like to have the same thing done to us in the same situation). But even if we are misinformed, the golden rule does not command specific wrong acts—because it does not command specific acts. Instead, the golden rule forbids inconsistent combinations.

Now consider the person who wants to be hated. Properly formulated, again, the golden rule just prescribes consistency; it does not command specific actions, and so it does not tell this person to hate others. But this person, like Electra, could satisfy golden-rule consistency while acting wrongly. To lead reliably to right action, the golden rule must also build on self-love (which it then extends to love of others). So, if you lack a healthy self-love, you need to build this

up—by seeing yourself and your good points more positively, by not fixating on your defects, and by appreciating how God loves you. Then the golden rule can fulfill its proper function.

The golden rule is a consistency principle, but it does not work alone. To lead reliably to right action, golden-rule consistency needs to build on things like knowledge, imagination, creativity, rationalized desires, and a healthy self-love.

\* \* \*

Why does consistency require that we follow the golden rule? Suppose I make Grandpa eat alone but am unwilling that I be treated that way in the same situation. Why is that inconsistent?

The golden rule rests on two consistency requirements: that we be *impartial* (in the sense of making similar evaluations about similar actions, regardless of the individuals involved) and *conscientious* (in the sense of living in harmony with our moral beliefs). If I am impartial and conscientious, then I will necessarily follow the golden rule:

If I am consistent, then I will not *make* Grandpa eat apart unless I also believe that it would be *all right* for me to make Grandpa eat apart.  
(conscientiousness)

If I am consistent, then I will not believe that that it would be all right for me to make *Grandpa* eat apart unless I also believe that it would be all right for *me* to be made to eat apart in the same situation.  
(impartiality)

If I am consistent, then I will not believe that it would be *all right* for me to be made to eat apart in the same situation unless I am also *willing* that I be made to eat apart in the same situation.  
(conscientiousness)

Therefore, if I am consistent, then I will not make Grandpa eat apart unless I am also willing that I be made to eat apart in the same situation.

So, if I am consistent, then I will not do something to another unless I am also willing that it be done to me in the same situation.<sup>7</sup>

Therefore, Gold 1 can be based on an abstract consistency argument. Similar reasoning justifies many variations. We might consider someone else we care about (maybe our daughter) on the

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7. My logic textbook (see the first footnote) uses tools of symbolic logic to put this framework into a "Formalized Ethical Theory." The corresponding 35-step formal proof of the golden rule in logical symbols is a thing of great beauty.



receiving end of the action. Or we might give consistency conditions, not for *doing* something, but for *wanting* something or for *holding a moral belief*. The golden rule can be, and historically has been, expressed in many ways. The golden rule is a family of related ideas.

The golden rule can fit into many different approaches. Philosophically, we can see the golden rule as a self-evident truth, as part of a rational procedure, as God's will, as a cultural convention, as a social contract for mutual advantages, as socially useful, as reflecting our feelings, or as promoting our self-interest (since it brings self-respect and better treatment from others). Religiously, the golden rule is part of Bahá'í, Buddhism, Christianity, Confucianism, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism, Sikhism, Taoism, Zoroastrianism, and so on. So, the golden rule is something that diverse groups can share. The golden rule is a point of unity in a diverse world.

## 2. The golden rule in Persia and Islam

The earliest written instances of the golden rule that we know of occurred about twenty-five hundred years ago in Greece, Persia, India, and China.<sup>8</sup> Since the dates are uncertain, it is difficult to know which writings occurred first.

In ancient Persia, Zoroastrianism accepted one supreme God and emphasized the conflict between good and evil. Various golden-rule sayings are attributed to the prophet Zoroaster (very roughly 500 BC) and his followers, including "That character is best that does not do to another what is not good for itself," "Regard a benefit to another as if it were your own," and "If you desire that others not insult you, then do not insult them." And the Persian King Xerxes (about 486 BC) reportedly said, "I will not do that for which I censure you."<sup>9</sup>

The classic sources of Islam include the Qur'an and Hadith (early 7th century).<sup>10</sup> The Qur'an forbids a specific golden-rule violation:

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8. For more details on the history of the golden rule, see the Chapter 5 chronology in my *Ethics and the Golden Rule*.

9. See "The Golden Rule in Zoroastrianism" by Mahnaz Moazami, in *The Golden Rule: The Ethics of Reciprocity in World Religions*, edited by Jacob Neusner and Bruce Chilton (New York: Continuum Books, 2008), 65–75; I paraphrase sayings from pages 68, 71, and 74. For Xerxes, see Herodotus's *Histories* 7.136 (<http://perseus.uchicago.edu/perseus-gi/citequery3.pl?dbname=GreekTexts&getid=1&query=Hdt.7>).

10. See "The Golden Rule in Islam" by Th. Emil Homerin, in *The Golden Rule: The Ethics of Reciprocity in World Religions*, 99–115; *The Golden Rule: A Universalist Ethic*, by H.D.T. Rost (Oxford: George Ronald, 1986), 96–110; and "The Golden Rule: An Islamic-dialogic Perspective," by Sohaib Saeed, paper at the 2010 Edinburgh Festival of Spirituality of Peace ([http://dialogicwfs.files.wordpress.com/2010/07/goldenrule\\_saeed1.pdf](http://dialogicwfs.files.wordpress.com/2010/07/goldenrule_saeed1.pdf)). <http://www.quranexplorer.com> and <http://islamworld.net> have the sacred texts.

“Woe to those that deal in fraud—those who, when they have to receive by measure from men, exact full measure, but when they have to give by measure or weight to men, give less than due” (83:1–3). The Qur’an also gives a general instruction to do good to others: “Be good to parents and to kinsmen and orphans and the needy and the close neighbor and the distant neighbor and the companion at your side and the wayfarer” (4:36). Several hadiths have a formula, attributed to Muḥammad, that is often seen as Islam’s central golden rule (Bukhārī 1:2:12, Muslim 1:72–3, and Nawawī 13):

None of you is a true believer unless he wishes for his brother what he wishes for himself.

There is some dispute about whether “brother” here means “brother Muslim” or “brother human.” Is the Islamic rule to wish only for “brother Muslims” what we want for ourselves, or to wish this also for “brother humans”? There are two main reasons for preferring the universal “brother humans” as better reflecting the Islamic tradition.<sup>11</sup> First, most further Islamic sources clearly prefer the wider interpretation, as we will see in the further discussion. Second, as mentioned earlier, the Qur’an and hadiths give duties toward non-Muslims. And there is the charming story (in Bukhārī 2:23:399) about how the Prophet stood up in reverence when a funeral procession passed by; when others expressed surprise and pointed out that this was the coffin of a Jew or non-believer, the Prophet replied, “But was he not a living human being?” This suggests the need to treat everyone with respect, whether or not the person is a fellow Muslim.<sup>12</sup>

The recent *A Common Word* book, which was signed by 300 Muslim leaders and 460 Muslim organizations across the world, sees the Islamic golden rule as applying to our treatment of everyone and formulates it as “None of you has faith until you love for your neighbour what you love for yourself.”<sup>13</sup>

Imam ‘Alī (about 600–60), a cousin and son-in-law of the Prophet and an important leader, gave a longer statement of the golden rule:<sup>14</sup>

11. Sohaib Saeed also argues for the universal “brother humans” interpretation, op. cit.

12. I am grateful to Professor Farhad Pour-Golafshan (who is Persian but teaches in Toronto, Canada) for this funeral example.

13. *A Common Word Between Us and You* (Jordan: Royal Aal al-Bayt Institute for Islamic Thought, 2009), <http://acommonword.com/index.php?lang=en&page=downloads>.

14. This is from the Nahj al-balāghah, Waṣiyya to al-Ḥasan b. ‘Alī, #31, quoted in *Recueil de textes du professeur Abdulaziz Sachedina*, by Minaz Cassam Chenai (Paris: Publibook, 2008), 215. I am grateful to Shuja Sh. ‘Alī (a Muslim seminarian in Qom, Iran) for telling me about ‘Alī’s statement.

O my son, regard yourself as a scale [against which you measure your behavior] with others. Hence, what you prefer for yourself, prefer for others; what you find objectionable for yourself, treat as such for others. Do not wrong anyone, just as you would not like to be wronged; do good to others just as you would like others to do good to you; that which you consider immoral for others, consider immoral for yourself.

This deals with both desires and actions (“prefer” and “do not wrong”), and with both doing good and refraining from harming (“do good” and “do not wrong”). And there is no suggestion that these “others” are limited to fellow Muslims.

The important thinker Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī (1058–1111) in his *Disciplining the Soul* gave this statement of the golden rule: “Were all people only to renounce the things they dislike in others, they would not need anyone to discipline them.” Thus the golden rule is an important help for disciplining ourselves toward greater perfection.<sup>15</sup>

The Sufi mystic philosopher Ibn ‘Arabī (1165–1240) stated the golden rule this way: “All the commandments are summed up in this, that whatever you would like the True One to do to you, that do to His creatures.” Here the golden rule applies to how we are to treat all creatures – which would include, not just all humans, but also all animals. And the golden rule, formulated in terms of how we want God to treat us, is given as the summary of how we are to live.<sup>16</sup>

The important Persian poet Sa‘dī (about 1213–92) in his *Gulistan* (Chapter 1, Story 10) had these verses, which accord with the spirit of the golden rule and are now displayed at the entrance of the United Nations Hall of Nations:

Human beings are members of a whole, In creation of one essence and soul. If one member is afflicted with pain, Other members uneasy will remain. If you have no sympathy for human pain, The name of human you cannot retain.

The context here is a story about an evil king who thinks nothing of breaking the fingers of a poor man. Many of Sa‘dī’s stories involve the idea that the good or evil that we do to others will somehow come back to us (sometimes through divine action). So, the good or evil that we do to another, we really are doing to ourselves. Here are some further ideas from Sa‘dī (my paraphrases):

15. *On Disciplining the Soul*, trans. T.J. Winter (Cambridge, UK: Islamic Texts Society, 1995), in the section on discovering our faults, page 54. Homerin, op. cit., 107, gives another saying from al-Ghazālī: “Deal with others as you wish yourself to be dealt with by them.”

16. This was quoted by Homerin, op. cit., 107.

- “If you want God to do good to you, do good to the people God has created.”
- “Do good even to the malevolent.”
- “Do good to others as God has done good to you.”

Sa’dī has many further stories and poems that connect with the golden rule (including also in his *Bustan* and *Odes*).<sup>17</sup>

The important Muslim Sufi thinker Hazrat Inayat Khan (1882–1927), in his “Ten Sufi Thoughts,” said, “Although the different religions, in teaching man how to act harmoniously and peacefully with his fellow-men, have given out different laws, they all meet in this one truth: do unto others as thou wouldst they should do unto thee.” Khan’s insight would later be confirmed in a formal agreement between the religions.<sup>18</sup>

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In 1993, the second Parliament of the World’s Religions met in Chicago. The 8,000 attendees represented many faiths, and many branches of faiths like Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, and Judaism. The Parliament tried to reach agreement on a “global ethics” document that supported common values. Most agreed on the need for this document and the central place of the golden rule. But it was not easy to produce a document that almost everyone could accept. For example, many Muslims and Christians wanted the document to mention God, while many Buddhists objected to this; the compromise was to speak of an “Ultimate Reality.” So, the document came to say, “As religious and spiritual persons, we base our lives on an Ultimate Reality, and draw spiritual power and hope therefrom.”

The final twenty-page document was called “Towards a Global Ethic: An Initial Declaration.” It highlighted the need for a *global ethic*: a consensus, not on everything, but on key norms that appeal to the religious and non-religious alike. One such norm is that every human being ought to be treated humanely; another is the golden rule:

There is a principle which is found and has persisted in many religious and ethical traditions of humankind for thousands of years: What you do not wish done to yourself, do not do to others! Or in positive terms:

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17. I am grateful to Farnaz Rahim Khorasani, a Persian who is doing a graduate degree in literature, for providing me with these and further references. See *Gulistan* Chapter 1 (Story 10, 18, 20, 26, 33, and 35), Chapter 2 (Story 20), and Chapter 8 (Story 2 and 33). Khorasani also notes that the golden rule is important in the moral education of children in Iran (as it is, I suppose, over much of the world).

18. See [http://www.sufiorder.org/ten\\_thoughts3.html](http://www.sufiorder.org/ten_thoughts3.html); these “Ten Sufi Thoughts” nicely express important ideas that are central to many religions. Thought 5 is about the golden rule.

What you wish done to yourself, do to others! This should be the irrevocable, unconditional norm for all areas of life, for families and communities, for races, nations, and religions.

There followed four commandments common to the various faiths, about killing, stealing, lying, and sexual immorality; these are explained in ways that all faiths can accept. Finally, there is a call for all, whether religious or not, to follow this common ethic.<sup>19</sup>

Every group overwhelmingly approved the document. It was signed by 143 representatives from Bahá'í, Brahma Kumaris, Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Interreligious Organizations, Islam, Jainism, Judaism, Native Religions, Neo-Paganism, Sikhism, Taoism, Theosophism, and Zoroastrianism. And so, for the first time in history, representatives of the world's religions formally agreed on a global ethic. This ethic emphasized the golden rule, as "the irrevocable, unconditional norm for all areas of life." And, of course, Islam was an important part of the agreement.<sup>20</sup>

The golden rule has continued to be popular in interfaith relations. In 2000, Paul McKenna, an interfaith minister in Toronto, created a poster that teaches the golden rule's global importance; it displays symbols and golden-rule sayings of 13 religions (including Islam) and is a good teaching device; the poster has sold 100,000 copies across the globe, with copies in different languages and many prominent places.<sup>21</sup> And in July 2011 the North American Interfaith Network (an organization for interfaith groups) had a conference on the theme of "many people, many faiths, one common principle, the golden rule"; about 20 faiths were represented (including Islam) and I gave a keynote address on the golden rule.

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Islamic-Christian relations recently moved to a new phase that emphasizes the golden rule. What started this was a talk in 2006 by

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19. See Hans Küng and Karl-Josef Kuschel, *A Global Ethic: The Declaration of the Parliament of the World's Religions*, trans. John Bowden (London: SCM Press, 1993); the Declaration is on Küng's site (see [http://www.weltethos.org/1-pdf/10-stiftung/declaration/declaration\\_english.pdf](http://www.weltethos.org/1-pdf/10-stiftung/declaration/declaration_english.pdf)).

20. Muslim signatures included Tan Sri Dató Seri Ahmad Sarji bin Abdul-Hamid, Dr. Qazi Ashfaq Ahmed, Hamid Ahmed, Mazar Ahmed, Hon. Louis Ferrakhan, Dr. Hamid Abdul Hai, Mohammed A. Hai, Dr. Mohammad Hamidullah, Dr. Aziza al-Hibri, Dr. Asad Husain, Dato Dr. Haji Ismail bin Ibrahim, Dr. Irfan Ahmat Khan, Qadir H. Khan, Dr. Abdel Rahman Osman, Prof. Seyyed Hossein Nasr, Imam Dawud Assad, Imam Warith Deen Mohammed, and Hon. Syed Shahabuddin.

21. The poster can be ordered online ([http://www.scarboromissions.ca/Golden\\_rule/poster\\_order.php](http://www.scarboromissions.ca/Golden_rule/poster_order.php)). Unfortunately, there is as yet no Persian version.

Pope Benedict XVI, the leader of the Catholic Church, at the University of Regensburg in Germany.<sup>22</sup> One of the pope's comments was seen as anti-Islam (although perhaps not intended this way). Many criticized the pope, some defended him, and some added anti-Islam remarks. The wisest reaction was a letter of 11 October 2006, signed by 38 Muslim leaders and scholars throughout the world, written to correct misconceptions, point out Muslim-Christian similarities, and call for dialogue. This became in 2007 a longer letter to the pope and other Christian leaders, signed by 138 Muslim scholars and intellectuals (including the Grand Muftis of Egypt, Syria, Jordan, Oman, Bosnia, Russia, Chad, and Istanbul). This grew into a book, *A Common Word Between Us and You*, now endorsed by over 300 Muslim leaders and 460 organizations, with responses from over 60 Christian leaders (including Pope Benedict). The tone is positive, puts away petty divisions, and aims at mutual understanding and respect.<sup>23</sup>

The Muslim *Common Word* begins with a summary:<sup>24</sup>

Muslims and Christians together make up well over half of the world's population. Without peace and justice between these two religious communities, there can be no meaningful peace in the world. The future of the world depends on peace between Muslims and Christians.

The basis for this peace and understanding already exists. It is part of the very foundational principles of both faiths: love of the One God, and love of the neighbour. These principles are found over and over again in the sacred texts of Islam and Christianity. The Unity of God, the necessity of love for Him, and the necessity of love of the neighbour is thus the common ground between Islam and Christianity. The following are only a few examples:

Of God's Unity, God says in the Holy Qur'an: Say: He is God, the One! / God, the Self-Sufficient Besought of all! (Al-Ikhlās 112:1–2).

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22. See "Faith, reason and the university," [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/benedict\\_xvi/speeches/2006/september/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_spe\\_20060912\\_university-regensburg\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/speeches/2006/september/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20060912_university-regensburg_en.html).

23. See *A Common Word Between Us and You*, op. cit. The original 2006 "Open letter to his Holiness Pope Benedict XVI" is at <http://ammanmessage.com/media/openLetter/english.pdf>. Iranians who signed the 2007 letter include Ayatollah Prof. Dr. Seyyed Mostafa Mohaghegh Damad (Dean of Department of Islamic Studies, The Academy of Sciences of Iran; Professor of Law and Islamic Philosophy, Tehran University; Fellow, The Iranian Academy of Sciences, Iran; Former Inspector General of Iran); Eng. Seyyed Hasan Shariatmadari (Leader of the Iranian National Republican Party); and Ayatollah Shaykh Muhammad Ali Taskhiri (Secretary General of the World Assembly for Proximity of Islamic Schools of Thought, Iran). Another 135 non-Iranian Muslims signed the document.

24. *A Common Word Between Us and You*, op. cit., 6–7.

Of the necessity of love for God, God says in the Holy Qur'an: So invoke the Name of thy Lord and devote thyself to Him with a complete devotion (Al-Muzzammil 73:8). Of the necessity of love for the neighbour, the Prophet Muhammad said: "None of you has faith until you love for your neighbour what you love for yourself."

In the New Testament, Jesus Christ said: 'Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One. / And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength.' This is the first commandment. / And the second, like it, is this: 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these." (Mark 12:29–31)

Note the centrality of the Islamic golden rule in this wonderful document: "None of you has faith until you love for your neighbour what you love for yourself."<sup>25</sup>

\* \* \*

Let me add two further recent reflections on the golden rule by Muslims. First, Abdullahi Ahmed An-Na'im bases the main argument of his important book, *Islam and the Secular State* (2008), on the golden rule.<sup>26</sup>

I am arguing for a secular state, constitutionalism, human rights, and citizenship from an Islamic perspective because I believe that this approach is indispensable for protecting the freedom of each and every person to affirm, challenge, or transform his or her cultural or religious identity. My right to be myself presupposes and requires me to accept and respect the right of others to be themselves too, on their own terms. This principle of reciprocity, or the Golden Rule, is the ultimate cross-cultural foundation of the universality of human rights.

The golden rule tells us to treat others as we want to be treated. So, if we want freedoms for ourselves (this is how we want to be treated), we must also grant them to others (treating them the same way). This gives a cross-cultural basis for human rights.

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25. The great Christian thinker, Thomas Aquinas, saw the golden rule as spelling out the meaning of "Love your neighbor as yourself"; he claimed (in his *Summa Theologica*, I-II, q. 99, a. 1) that "when it is said, 'All things whatsoever you would that men should do to you, do you also to them,' this explains the rule of neighborly love, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'"

26. *Islam and the Secular State* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2008), 24. See also his "A Kinder, Gentler Islam?" *Transition* 52 (1991): 4–16, and Anouar Majid's "The Politics of Feminism in Islam," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 23 (1998): 321–61. Judging from how controversial politics are in my own country, I would not be surprised if there were disputes among Muslim thinkers about An-Na'im's political conclusions.

Lastly, let me mention a paper by Sohaib Saeed, given at a 2010 conference on the golden rule in Scotland: “The Golden Rule: An Islamic-Dialogic Perspective.”<sup>27</sup> While the paper covers many points, let me mention just three. First, as noted before, Saeed argues that the central Islamic golden rule, “None of you (truly) believes until he loves for his brother what he loves for himself,” should be applied not just to “brother Muslims” but also to “brother humans”; so the formula is about our treatment of everyone (Muslims and non-Muslims). Second, he proposes this Islamic golden rule: “Treat others as you hope God will treat you, in this life or the next”; and he illustrates this by a verse whereby we are to forgive others their faults even as we love for our merciful God to forgive our faults (Qur’an 24:22). Third, he mentions an interfaith application of the golden rule, whereby we are to avoid treating the religion of another in ways that we hate our own religion to be treated; so, as we hate it when people distort our religion without trying to understand it sympathetically, so too we should avoid doing this same thing to others.

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So the golden rule has a deep basis in Persia and Islam, from the early statements of Zoroaster, to classical Islamic sayings, to important historical figures of Islam, to recent Muslim thinkers. Here I would like to develop three ideas further.

First, Sohaib Saeed mentioned how the golden rule ought to govern interfaith relations. A Christian thinker, Christian Troll, expressed the same idea in these words: “Try to understand the other’s faith as you would like your own faith to be understood.”<sup>28</sup> So when I decide how to deal with another’s faith, I should first ask how I want others to deal with my faith. I find that I want others, when they approach my Christian faith, to:

- listen carefully, be fair, show respect, and not distort;
- not generalize from a few bad cases (saying that all Christians are evil just because a few are);
- not compare the best of their faith with the worst of mine;

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27. Saeed, op. cit.

28. He said this at a meeting between Christians and Muslims (<http://chiesa.espresso.repubblica.it/articolo /208895?eng=y>). Other Christians who dialogue with Muslims include Thomas Michel, *A Christian View of Islam*, edited by Irfan Omar (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Press, 2010), and Ovey Mohammed, “Muslim-Christian Dialogue” ([http://www.scarboromissions.ca/Scarboro\\_missions\\_magazine/Issues/1994/October /muslim\\_christian\\_dialogue.php](http://www.scarboromissions.ca/Scarboro_missions_magazine/Issues/1994/October /muslim_christian_dialogue.php)).



- give my faith the benefit of the doubt (so do not take a passage like Luke 14:26, “Unless you hate your father and mother you cannot be my disciple,” literally when most Christians do not take it that way);
- neither deny nor exaggerate differences between their faith and mine.

If I follow the golden rule, I will treat another’s faiths in the same way. So, the golden rule, besides being present in the religions of the world, also guides us on how these religions should relate to each other.

Second, two Muslim thinkers give a distinctly Islamic golden-rule formula:

- “Whatever you would like the True One to do to you, that do to His creatures.” (Ibn ‘Arabī)
- “Treat others as you hope God will treat you, in this life or the next.” (Sohaib Saeed)

Such wording, while not found in other faiths (as far as I know), should make good sense to other faiths. From my Christian perspective, the formulas ring true. So, other faiths here can learn from Islam.

Christianity, however, does have something a little similar. In the Our Father prayer (Matthew 6:9–13), we Christians pray to God “Forgive us our injuries to others as we forgive those who injure us.” In effect, we ask God to treat us as we treat others. We cannot sincerely pray this prayer unless we follow the golden rule toward others, unless we forgive them as we want to be forgiven. So, the prayer ties our relationship to God to our relationship to our fellow human beings. While this is not the same as the Islamic formulas given above, both do tie our actions to how we want God to treat us.

Lastly, some Persian or Islamic golden-rule formulas deal with our *desires* toward others (what we *wish*, *love*, or *prefer*) instead of our *actions* (what we do):

- “None of you is a true believer unless he *wishes* for his brother what he wishes for himself.” (Hadiths)
- “None of you has faith until you *love* for your neighbour what you love for yourself.” (Same, but as translated by *Common Word*)
- “What you prefer for yourself, *prefer* for others.” (Imam ‘Alī)

This tradition also has golden-rule formulas about actions, as in the examples given earlier from Zoroaster, the Qur'an (against fraud), Imam 'Alī, Ibn 'Arabī, Hazrat Inayat Khan, and Sohaib Saeed. So, this tradition has both golden-rule forms: about desires and about actions. But the forms about desires are more distinctive. Very few other traditions have golden-rule forms about desires.

I see the action and desire forms as different but complementary. Most people see morality as being about both actions and desires; if asked, they would likely accept both golden-rule forms. I argued in the earlier section that the golden rule is a family of related principles, all of which involve switching perspective; so our action or desire or moral belief about how to treat others must harmonize with our desire or moral belief about how we or some loved one of ours is to be treated in relevantly or exactly similar circumstances.<sup>29</sup> Historically and logically, there are many legitimate ways to convey this idea. So, the golden rule is a family of related sayings, not a single saying, and no one saying can exhaust richness of the golden rule.<sup>30</sup>

The desire form of the golden rule is important because our actions grow out of our desires. The great Christian thinker Augustine recognized this in his famous statement, "Love, and do as you will." This really means, "Form your desires rightly, and then follow your desires." Augustine thought that we do wrong because of improperly ordered desires; perhaps we desire our own wealth more than the interests and fair treatment of our fellow human beings, or we desire lustful sexual satisfaction with a stranger more than the good of our wife and children, or we desire human approval more than divine approval. Flawed actions come from flawed desires. One such flaw is to desire good for ourselves but not for others, as when we defraud others (the Qur'an example); this violates the central Islamic golden rule. And so, by emphasizing the importance of right desires, the Islamic formula contributes to our understanding of the golden rule.

### 3. Conclusion

In this paper, I have (1) explained and defended the golden rule, and (2) talked about its deep roots in Persia and Islam. There is much more to say about the golden rule – how it relates to other world religions

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29. If we want to avoid the philosophical objections to the golden rule, then we must understand these golden-rule formulas as suggested in the previous section – with a "same situation" qualifier, and so forth. This present section speaks more loosely.

30. To see some of the rich diversity in the various golden-rule sayings of the last 2500 years across the world, see the Chapter 5 chronology in my *Ethics and the Golden Rule*. This is online at my Web site (<http://www.harryhiker.com/chronology>).

and histories, and to moral education, egoism, evolution, society, racism, business, medicine, and so on. And there are further objections and theoretical issues. If you are interested in these, I suggest that you read my new book that I mentioned at the beginning: *Ethics and the Golden Rule*. You might also read the book on *The Golden Rule* by Jeffrey Wattles (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), which complements my approach.